

APRIL 27, 1978

Holdover winds from March are scorching the Shortgrass Country. Way in the nights, the dry gusts howl through cracks and attic vents. Barn mice haul water to moisten their nests; feed grains parch within the sacks from the heat and dryness. Impact of a dry spring has put the herders on edge. We are all waiting and watching for the clouds.

Most of the time, I sit at my desk. Dust mixes in pipe ashes, forming arcs and circles. I pick up tablets and rearrange ink stands. I stay too restless to be indoors and too confused to work outdoors.

Town offers no relief from the drouth. Squash and tomato farming is underway at Mertzon. Everywhere you drive, some busy thumb is out burning the handle from a rake or a hoe, or defacing the earth with a tiller or a plow. At the rate the town site is being turned into a truck farm, enough gooseneck squash alone is going to be produced to feed the United States and a major part of the free world.

Squash, as you probably know, is easy to raise in huge quantities. The major problem with squash plantations is finding a bumper eater to eat up a bumper crop.

For the past two seasons, I've been able to keep the squash that folks gave us cleared off the front yard with a 450 horsepower tractor. Late in the summer last year, I needed a bigger rig. Okra and cucumbers put me behind. Once people start giving you their surplus, you never know your friends from your enemies.

My home isn't going to be buried in that kind of love and kindness. Child Who Sits in the Sun can put away a lot of squash, but 35 bushels of black cherries will overstock an outfit our size.

Even in the days when all eight of our children were home we didn't need two truckloads of squash a week to feed the family. The worst runaway case we ever had was caused from one of the boys thinking that a big patch of gourds were squash vines. He was on the way home from school one afternoon. Summer had ended and he was just toodling along the trail like kids do in the heat of autumn. Overflow water had concentrated a huge plot of gourds in his path. He wasn't emotionally prepared to think that squash might be growing wild on the countryside. I don't think he'd ever have come back home if he hadn't seen an old milk cow eating gourds in a big way.

Before the squash is harvested, I am going to make plans. I think that I might talk a San Angelo produce house into making a trade. What I want to do is to swap a metric ton of squash for a pint of fresh strawberries. I figure that with any luck at all we'd have strawberries left over to make wine.

It must take a lot of courage to plant on a dry spring. I walk over to the windows and watch the dust rise and fall. Squash may taste mighty good before this is over. What I wouldn't give for a shower and a half-inch follow-up.